NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5636 MARCH 22, 1978
WAYNE COREY/BANGKOK

THAI - LAO RELATIONS

ANNCR:

RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND ITS SMALL NORTHERN NEIGHBOR, LAOS, HAVE NOT BEEN SMOOTH SINCE THE PATHET LAO TOOK OVER THE LAO GOVERNMENT IN NINETEEN SEVENTY FIVE. BUT THE THAI GOVERNMENT IS TRYING TO IMPROVE RELATIONS, AND THE LAO FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT TO BANGKOK THIS WEEK OFFERS A GOOD OPPORTUNITY. WAYNE COREY HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM BANGKOK

VOICE :

FOR TWO COUNTRIES WITH SUCH CLOSE PAST FRIENDSHIP THE HOSTILITY AND MISTRUST BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS IS THE UNNATURAL. THE MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE AMONG NATIONS IS CLEARLY EVIDENT IN THE CASE OF THAI-LAO RELATIONS. AS THE "BANGKOK POST" POINTED OUT IN A REPORT ON LAO FOREIGN MINISTER PHOUN SIPRASEUTH'S VISIT HERE, THERE ARE NUMEROUS EXAMPLES OF THE VALUE OF BILATERAL COOPERATION.

THAILAND STILL OFFERS LAND-LOCKED LAOS ITS MOST ECONOMICAL EXPORT AND IMPORT TRANSIT FACILITY. IT CAN ALSO OFFER DROUGHT STRICKEN LAOS SOME OF ITS ABUNDANT RICE STOCK AT REASONABLE PRICES. LAOS CAN ALSO HELP THAILAND, AS WAS DEMONSTRATED LAST WEEKEND. A POWER BLACKOUT IN MUCH OF THAILAND WAS LIMITED IN SCOPE BECAUSE OF POWER SUPPLIES TO NORTHEASTERN AREAS OF THAILAND FROM THE NGAM NUM DAM IN LAOS. BOTH THAILAND AND LAOS ALSO WORK TOGETHER WITH VIETNAM ON THE INTERIM MEKONG COMMITTEE TO JOINTLY SHARE THE BENEFITS OF THE MEKONG RIVER'S RESOURCES.

BUT DESPITE THE VISIBLE ADVANTAGES OF FRIENDLY COOPERATION, THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER OF LAOS IN NINETEEN SEVENTY FIVE CAUSED HOSTILITY AND MISTRUST BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS. SHOOTING INCIDENTS ALONG THE MEKONG RIVER BORDER, THE FLOOD OF LAO REFUGEES INTO THAILAND, AND THE VIETNAMESE MILITARY PRESENCE IN LAOS HAVE CAST A DARK SHADOW OVER BILATERAL TIES.

THE LAO FOREIGN MINISTER'S FIRST VISIT TO BANGKOK CAN PERHAPS HELP TO CLEAR THE ATMOSPHERE CLOUDED BY LAO PRIME MINISTER KAYSON PHOUMVIHAN'S CHARGES THAT THERE ARE STILL AMERICAN MILITARY BASES HERE IN THAILAND. THE "BANGKOK POST" SUGGESTED THAT THE LAO FOREIGN MINISTER COULD BE TAKEN ANYWHERE IN THAILAND TO SEE FOR HIMSELF THAT THERE ARE NO GROUNDS FOR THE LAO PRIME MINISTER'S ALLEGATIONS.

ONE CAUSE FOR HOPE THAT MUTUAL ADVANTAGE WILL ASSERT ITSELF IN THAI-LAO RELATIONS IS THE BORDER CONFLICT BETWEEN VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA. VIETNAM'S EFFORTS TO ISOLATE CAMBODIA DIPLOMATICALLY WAS UNDOUBTEDLY A MAJOR FACTOR BEHIND VIETNAMESE FOREIGN MINISTER NGUYEN DUY TRINH'S RECENT VISIT TO NON-COMMUNIST SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THAILAND. SINCE VIETNAM IS ACTIVELY IMPROVING ITS RELATIONS WITH BANGKOK, ITS ONLY NUTURAL THAT LAOS, UNDER VIETNAMESE INFLUENCE, WILL FOLLOW SUIT.

VIETNAM AND LAOS BOTH HAVE EMBASSIES HERE IN BANGKOK. CAMBODIA DOES NOT. BUT THAILAND STILL SAYS IT WOULD LIKE FRIENDLY AND EVEN-HANDED RELATIONS WITH ALL THREE INDOCHINESE STATES. AND THE THAI GOVERNMENT HOPES ITS CONSTANTLY EXPRESSED GOODWILL TOWARD LAOS AND FOREIGN MINISTER PHOUN SIPRASEUTH'S FIRST VISIT HERE WILL RESULT IN A DIPLOMATIC BREAKTHROUGH.

JS/PY